

Mayor Megan Barry
Nashville Youth Violence Summit
Monday, December 14, 2015
Pearl-Cohn Magnet High School Auditorium

Thank you all for being here tonight.

I want to thank all of our panelists for being with us and for everything you do every day for Nashville, especially Criminal Court Clerk Howard Gentry, who raised the issue of youth violence so eloquently and so forcefully during the campaign last summer.

Our city is doing a lot of things right. Nashville is a warm and welcoming place, and people want to live here.

But we still have a lot of work to do. After two years in a row when our homicide total dropped below 45, that number has climbed to 67 in 2015.

That's 67 people whose families will never see them again. That's 67 people who will never laugh again.

And many of those 67 people were young. 36 of them were between the ages of 13 and 25, including Georgio Gray, who was shot and killed outside his apartment in East Nashville on Saturday. Georgio was 22.

Georgio was just the most recent young person who died violently this year.

Treyonta Burleson lost her life to a bullet six weeks ago – a bullet fired in the street, over an argument. Treyonta was 14.

Cameron Selmon was killed early one October morning on a college campus, gunned down over a dice game. Cameron was 19.

Brandon Williams was killed by gunfire inside a nightclub last spring. Brandon was 17.

There are 32 other names of young people I could also mention – children, really – who died violent deaths in 2015. And all too often, young people have also been on the other end of the gun.

And we all know that homicides don't happen in patterns that reflect the makeup of our population. 51 of those 66 victims – more than 77 percent of them – were African-American.

As a city, as a community of people who care about each other's health and safety, we can't stand for this. We need to be doing everything in our power to make sure we don't hear these kinds of numbers and see these kinds of stories anymore.

Tonight is a beginning – a beginning to take a hard look at what we can do. We won't find a solution before we leave this auditorium tonight. But we will start an extremely important community conversation about how we can make Nashville safer.

I want our community conversation to capture the feelings of hopelessness that exist in some parts of our city; define the problem of youth violence in a meaningful way; ask the right questions; and create a sense of how we can go forward and make a difference in this city that we all care about, this city we all call home.

And I want to solve this problem.

Your participation tonight is critical to helping us identify what we should be doing to prevent young people from committing violent acts.

We'll discuss four important areas tonight and how they affect youth violence prevention. Those four areas are:

- Economic opportunities,
- Environment,
- Family support and mentorship,
- And health and well-being.

We want to hear from you tonight. But the work won't stop after we leave here. Over the next three months, my office will bring the community together to create a plan that will guide our efforts to prevent youth violence in Nashville.

By early March, I want a concrete action plan that:

- Builds on the foundation we already have in place to prevent youth violence
- Identifies challenges and needs
- Articulates key principles, goals and objectives
- Incorporates input from a broad array of partners, community members and youth
- Acknowledges where our resources are limited
- Incorporates best practices and important lessons learned from around the country, but also aligns our plan with the collaborations that are already taking place here and that are unique to Nashville
- Lays out a framework and blueprint for achieving success in reducing and preventing youth violence
- And includes an accountability process for measuring outcomes

I recently read an article that described the young people we're talking about as "opportunity youth" – not at-risk youth or disaffected youth, but opportunity youth.

That's how I hope we all can think about what we're doing here. These young people have opportunities to do great things if they're moving in the right direction. They have opportunities to shine if we can give them reasons to hope.

And we have an opportunity to do that. Because that's really what this is about: connecting youth to hope – and to opportunity.

There's a young person in my life, too. I have a 20-year-old son named Max. He's in college. And I want every young person growing up in Nashville to have the same opportunities he's had.

I didn't know Treyonta Burleson or Cameron Selmon or Brandon Williams or any of the other young people who have been killed in Nashville this year. I wish I had.

But what I wish most of all is that they could have had the chance to realize their potential.

I can't bring them back. But all of us together can honor their memory by working to prevent more violence. We are one city, one community, and we can solve this problem together.

My administration can't do it alone. Metro government can't do it alone. It's going to take all of us: nonprofits, schools, churches, the business community, fraternities and sororities – everyone. We all have a role to play.

Together, I know we can make Nashville a safer and better city, a city where opportunity youth have hope – and every opportunity to succeed.

We start that work tonight.

Thank you.